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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the International Communication Association (ICA) audit, the aim of which is to establish an integrated communication audit system and a multimethod approach to the auditing of the communication of an organization. Many of an organization's communication variables and concepts are examined so that strengths and weaknesses in the system of communication can be identified. The benefits the clients of the ICA audit will gain are: a better understanding of the nature of their communication as they fit into a broader system instead of working in isolation; and maps of the operational communication network. The audit would allow for the improvement of the academic scholarship concerning organizational communication on both theoretical and practical levels. The audit typically takes five to six months from the initial contact with the client organization to the presentation of the final report, with the actual administration of the audit taking about four months. The background, rationale, and history of the development of the ICA audit since 1964 are discussed. (TS)

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A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF THE ICA AUDIT

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A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF THE ICA AUDIT[1]

The concept of auditing the communication of an organization is not a new one. Dennis (1973), Redding (1972), Rudolph (1972), and Ayers (1972) cite a number of previous attempts to analyze communication in the organizational setting. While these previous audits have been valuable and informative, each offered only one method for studying the communication of an organization. The aim of the International Communication (ICA) audit (under the auspices of Division 4--Organizational Communication) is to establish an integrated communication audit system rather than an audit tool; the ICA is assembling a multi-method approach to the auditing of the communication of an organization rather than relying on a single instrument for such analysis.

The Synopsis of ICA Audit Plan (Note 1) gives a clear understanding of why the general purpose of the ICA audit was developed:

> Like an accounting audit, the communication audit is designed to essentially photograph an organization's communication at a given point in time. A host of important communication variables and concepts are examined so that strengths and weaknesses in the system of communication can be identified. These "benchmarks" can then be evaluated diagnostically by the organization to determine if actual or perceived communication practices and activities correspond to those considered to be in the best interest of effective and efficient organizational functioning (p.1).

In addition to this general statement, a number of specific objectives of the ICA audit have been delineated:

1. Establish a normed data bank to enable comparisons to be made between organizations on their communication systems;
2. Establish, through these comparative studies, a general external validation of many organizational communication theories and propositions;
3. Provide research outlets for faculty and professionals and graduate students;
4. Establish the ICA as a visible center for organizational communication measurement. (Synopsis of ICA Audit Plan, Note 1, p. 1)

These four specific objectives point to the varied benefits that will accrue from the ICA audit. An organization participating in the audit will for the first time be able to compare its communication environments with those of other organizations that have also participated in the audit. This should help all participating organizations to better understand and improve the nature of their communication as they fit into a broader system rather than in total isolation. This is analogous to treating organizations as open rather than closed systems.

The audit will also allow for the improvement of the academic scholarship concerning organizational communication on both theoretical and practical levels. Scholars in the organizational communication field have the ability to cross-validate organizational communication theories and a chance to gain practical experience in research communication processes within organizations.

Another important effect of the establishment of the ICA audit will be to bring the International Communication Association to the forefront and into the limelight of those interested in analyzing communication within organization.

While these objectives are very important for those who are scholars and practitioners in the field of organizational communication, they speak only briefly of the advantages of the audit for participating organizations. The benefits the clients of the ICA audit will gain have also been presented in the Synopsis (Note 1):

1. Verbal summaries of successful/unsuccessful critical communication incidents;
2. Maps of the operational communication network (as opposed to the hypothesized net predicted from organizational charts)-- frequencies of who talks to whom, about what, for how long, using what medium, at whose initiation, and with what success;

3. Profiles of feelings and perceptions of communication events, practices and relationships;
4. Comparisons of perceptions of behaviors with the actual behaviors;
5. Benchmarks on communication behaviors and perceptions to be used for possible pre-post measurement to diagnose organizational change or development (or to diagnose specific organizational changes needed). (p. 1-2)

To achieve these goals for client organizations, for researchers and practitioners of organizational communication, and for the ICA itself, the audit will utilize a multi-method approach to analyzing the communication of an organization: (1) questionnaire survey; (2) interview schedules; (3) critical communication experiences technique; (4) the diary method of communication network analysis; and (5) the questionnaire format of communication network analysis.

The questionnaire survey involves anonymous responses of perceptions about a number of communication dimensions in the organization including upward and downward communication, sources and channels of communication, information overload, and organizational communication relationships.

The interview schedules include both exploratory interviews utilizing mainly open-ended questions to obtain some ideas of the communication environment of the organization, and later follow-up interviews to help explain the findings and results of the other audit tools.

The communication experiences technique (critical incidents) involves the collection of effective and ineffective communication episodes that have happened in the organization. The critical incidents can add richness to and provide fuller explanations for the results obtained from the other audit instruments.

Communication network analysis attempts to find the paths through which information actually flows in an organization, rather than to look at at a formal hierarchial chart which may not have any relationship to actual communication flow. The network analysis of the ICA audit will be achieved by the use of two different tools -- the diary method and the questionnaire format. For the diary method each participant is asked to keep a diary of specified communication activities such as conversations, phone calls, written materials received and sent, etc. over a one week period. For the questionnaire format each participant is asked to recall significant communication activities such as initiation and reception of important information with others in the organization.

The communication audit typically takes five to six months from the initial contact with the client organization to the presentation of the final report, with the actual administration of the audit taking about three to four months.

The results of the audit are fed back to the client organization utilizing descriptive statistics, general conclusions, and recommendations for the organization concerning their communication problems. Audit follow-ups to the client usually procede along the following steps:

1. After management has reviewed the results, the data are commonly shared next with other subordinate supervisory personnel in the organization.
2. The findings of the audit (both favorable and unfavorable) are condensed and distributed to all members of the organization.
3. A committee is typically formed to study the audit results and make recommendations to management.
4. An action program is undertaken to implement recommendations approved in "3" above. (Synopsis of ICA Audit Plan, Note 1, p. 4-5)

Basic thinking about a communication audit has taken place in the ICA starting around 1964. This thinking centered around two crucial problems: (1) the need for a taxonomy of meaningful variables in organizational communication; and (2) the lack of comparative data from a variety of organizations about communication within organizations. Though there was discussion of these topics, no action was taken concerning the problems raised until the early part of this decade.

At the ICA annual convention in Phoenix in 1971, these concerns were translated into an action plan. At that convention Division 4 (Organizational Communication) held a marathon planning session to discuss the possibilities of an ICA Communication audit. This planning session was under the lead of Eldon Baker (currently at the University of Montana), the Division 4 chairperson. The need for long-term projects and the development of a total audit system were stressed during these discussions.

At the ICA annual convention in Atlanta in 1972, Division 4 held a workshop under the chairmanship of Brent Peterson (currently at Brigham Young University) and Howard Greenbaum (currently at Motor Parts Industries, Inc., Melville, New York), entitled "Construction of a Communication Audit: An Examination of Communication Systems and their Effectiveness to consider the theory and application of a communication audit system. Papers were presented on the conceptual and methodoligical considerations of a communication audit (Greenbaum, 1972; Grunig, 1972; Rudolph, 1972; Farace & Russell, 1972; Franc, 1972; and Ayers, 1972) and the practical application of communication audits (Goldhaber & Horan, 1972; Brenner & Sigband, 1972; Hickson, 1972; Jain, 1972; Tedrick, 1972; and Burhans, 1972). A related session considered the development of a code of ethics for consultants in the field of organizational communication (Redding, 1972b; Hays, 1972; Saxienan, 1972).

Gerald Goldhaber (currently at the State University of New York, Buffalo) outlined the method and procedures for a communication audit, and he and Gary Richetto (currently at the Williams Company, Tulsa, Oklahoma) were selected to head the ICA audit. A three phase program for the development of the audit was decided upon: (1) development of the pilot instruments for the audit; (2) testing the pilot instruments; and (3) implementing the audit system and building a data bank (i.e., the ongoing communication audit project).

One of the tasks to be accomplished by the next ICA convention was the identification of possible audit instruments. This task was to be accomplished by regional task groups under the coordination of Ray Falcione (currently at the University of Maryland) and Howard Greenbaum in the East, Harry Dennis (currently at the Executive Committee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin) and R. Vincent Farace (currently at Michigan State University) in the Mideast, Cal Downs (currently at Kansas University) and Don Schwartz (currently at North Dakota State University) in the Midwest, and Brent Petersen and Don Faules (currently at the University of Utah), who was later replaced by Belle Ruth Witkin (currently at the Alameda County School Department, Hayward, California), in the West.

At this time there was also an expressed need to set up an organizational structure for the audit, to identify goals and objectives, and to answer the following questions: What should be audited? and How should the audit be accomplished? These questions and concerns were to be handled through position papers to be presented at the next ICA convention.

At the next ICA convention in Montreal in 1973 the ICA audit plan, under the direction of Gerald Goldhaber and Gary Richetto, adopted the theoretical and methodological rationale for the audit from the position papers which stemmed from the discussions in Atlanta in 1972 (Dennis, 1973;

Goldhaber & Richetto, 1973a; Faules, 1973; Farace, 1973; Lahiff, 1973; and Goldhaber & Richetto, 1973b). There was also a workshop discussion session moderated by Goldhaber and Richetto, which considered the audit and its future. A general agreement on the various kinds of methodologies to be utilized in the ICA communication audit was reached based upon the findings of the regional task force reports. The methodologies agreed upon were questionnaire surveys of perceptions of communication in the organization, interviews, and network analysis. These, along with the critical incidents technique, are the instruments that have been adopted for the audit. No details were settled upon at that time, though.

The task for the interim until the next ICA convention was also established--to review and evaluate all available relevant literature concerning previous audits of communication attempted in organizations. The completion and reporting of this task revealed and illustrated three critical points abou previous communication audit attempts: (1) the lack of external validity of previous audits and audit instruments; (2) the individual nature of previous audit tools (in contrast to a multimethod approach); and (3) the lack of lateral exchange and lack of a broad data base (i.e., the use of single instrument, single organization, one-shot studies). These findings reiterated the need for the establishment of the kind of broad communication audit system as proposed by the ICA.

At the ICA annual convention in New Orleans in 1974 the regional task force coordinators and the ICA audit coordinators held an all day intensive workshop on teaching the use of the audit and a short workshop session on designing the audit. In addition separate workshop groups were established to concentrate on a particular methodology for auditing communication within an organization. There was an interview group, a survey group, a critical incidents group, a network group, and a diary

group. Each of these workshop groups sought to develop audit instruments for each of the separate methodologies.

The finalization of these instruments discussed in the workshop groups became one of the tasks to be accomplished by the next ICA convention. Groups for this interim period were composed along task lines rather than regional lines as had previously been the case. Thus, the ICA audit plan moved from Phase 1 (the development of pilot instruments) into Phase 2 (the testing of the pilot instruments). This transition necessitated the discussion of data analysis (Derry, 1974), ethics (Mandel, 1974), credentialing and the selection of pilot researchers (Richetto & Goldhaber, 1974), and selection of pilot organizations (Baker, 1974). The organization selected for the pilot testing of the audit was the Arizona Public Service Company. The pilot testing was carried out during the interim period between ICA conventions.

At this point in the development of the ICA communication audit Gerald Goldhaber became the Chairman of Division 4 (Organizational Communication) of ICA and Harry Dennis took his place as head of the ICA audit along with Gary Richetto.

At the ICA annual convention in Chicago in 1975 an all day marathon was held under the direction of Gary Richetto and Harry Dennis to discuss the development of the audit. Also, at this convention the results of the first pilot test of the ICA audit were reported (Wood, Perrill, & Buley, 1975). The report indicated that through factor analysis, multiple regression, and cannonical correlation the instruments utilized in the pilot testing were modified, clarified, and finalized. The report also provided validity data for the instruments. A number of recommendations about the conduct of future audits included in the report indicated the need for communicating the rationale of the audit to those participating (including management's endorsement of the audit), the need for making sure that all participants

understand when the audit will occur and what procedures will be used, and to provide oral and written assurances that all responses will be kept confidential.

From this point the ICA audit moved into Phase 3 (the creation of the ongoing ICA audit project and the establishment of the data bank). The ICA communication audit of the Ottawa General Hospital was completed and feedback given to the hospital on June 1, 1975; the audit of the Leon County School System (Talhassee, Florida) was completed and reported on June 15, 1975; the audit of the offices of Senator Pete Domenici of New Mexico was completed and reported on September 30, 1975; and the audit of the GTE Sylvania Corportion is in its final stages and will be reported to the company toward the end of November, 1975.

There will be a meeting in mid-November, 1975 to deal with a number of currently unresolved issues confronting the ICA audit. Those attending the meeting will be Gerald Goldhaber, Gary Richetto, Harry Dennis, and Don Porter (currently at the State University of New York, Buffalo). They will finalize the entire audit package including the management of the audit plan and a complete examination of the audit instruments. The management plan of the audit has already been outlined and the participants at this meeting will attach names to the organizational chart. Among the suggestions to be discussed about the audit instruments are the modification of the interview guidelines, the modification of the survey questionnaire by cutting it in half, the completion of the categorization of the critical incidents (about 1500 have been categorized thus far) by creating a set of categories and a key word dictionary, which will enable clients to code their own critical incidents tests, and to finalize the communication diary, which though pilot tested only once has provided valuable output.

The participants will also discuss the credentialing procedure for those interested in becoming auditors. It has been suggested that there should be three criteria for audit credentialing:

1. Experience--five years in the organizational communication field as measured by three letters of recommendation and a vita.
2. Knowledge of the background, instruments, and the entire audit process as measured by participation in officially sanctioned full day audit workshops.
3. Audit experience or audit internship including credentialing of two previously credentialed auditors of the ability to do the following:
   a. Identify, cpntact, and negotiate with clients.
   b. Assemble needed resources, human and financial (audit team, money, etc.)
   c. Conduct the audit (use of the audit instruments, familiarity with audit procedures).
   d. Analyze and interpret data.
   e. Write the final audit report.
   f. Give feedback to the client.

The ICA board has approved and sanctioned the general thrust of the whole management plan of the ICA communication audit. This meeting is to finalize some of the specific details of the approved plan.

The ICA audit is an exciting project for practitioners and scholars of organizational communication. Yet, a number of concerns have been expressed about the audit and should be t uched upon here. There has been some feeling that there is a built in bias in the audit toward management and that there is an overemphasis on downward communication in the survey questionnaire and too little treatment of participative decision making and other upward communication dimensions in that instrument.

Another set of concerns was raised by a number of people and received its most forceful vocalization when Gary Richetto, Howard Greenbaum, and Sandra O'Connell (currently at the Equitable Life Assurance Society, New York) presented the audit plan to the annual meeting of the Industrial Communication Council (ICC) in Philadelphia in 1974. The basic objections raised about the ICA audit were that many did not see the need for another audit since so many similar types of "audits" had been done in the past with little success and it was felt that this audit would also not provide much of a payoff, and it was questioned why an academic organization was competing with commercial consulting houses, especially since the ICA audit plan charges much less for their audit than do the commercial consulting firms for their services. Yet, given these objections, the ICC still has given $1,000 to the ICA to develop the audit through pretesting and pilot study and does support the ICA audit.

One final concern about the audit deals with the logistics of setting up and keeping current the large data bank, which is one of the expressed objectives of the ICA audit. To accomplish this goal will require the auditing a wide variety of organizations on a continual basis, which may involve a great deal of time, effort, and expense.

Thus, there is still much work to be done, now and in the future, to keep the audit a viable, successful, and valuable project. Increased participation, hard work, and the influx of new people committed to the audit are needed to make the ICA communication audit an important contribution to the field of organizational communication.

FOOTNOTES

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